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ABSTRACT

This presentation offers one perspective on Canadians' use of television. Daily life in Canada is inspected in an effort to discern what it is about the way of life in Canada that makes Canadians need television to the extent that they do. Much of the public discourse on television and children focuses on perceived negative influences. Rarely highlighted are things the medium does well. Research of the last 30 years has sufficiently illuminated television's influence on children. These research results are outlined briefly. The discussion develops a perspective on Canadian family life, specifies the way television is used in Canada, and examines some of the influences of television. Concluding discussion offers suggestions as to how parents and society can come to terms with television. (RH)

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CANADIANS SEEM TO NEED TELEVISION

by

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Remarks to

A Symposium about Families

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CANADIANS SEEM TO NEED TELEVISION

Parents have always worried about the effects that various popular media have and have had on children. They worried about the effect of the Saturday movie matinees, radio dramas, comic books, and more recently, television. Much research has been conducted to examine the various effects.

The research data can generally be summarized in one sentence: "for some children under some circumstances television has certain effects. For other children under different circumstances television has different effects." This conclusion can be further summarized in two words "it depends". These conclusions are not very helpful to parents who must decide what is best for their children.

Interestingly enough, most of the research on television focuses on children and rarely examines the way adults use the medium itself and the content it transmits. This paper will briefly offer a perspective which will hopefully help us as parents, husbands and wives, children and friends to understand how we have chosen to use the medium of television in our daily lives (our motivations) and how, if we had not devised this medium over three decades ago, we would now have to invent it. Given the modern lives we must all lead, the choice may have been reduced to one of television or Valium for many of us.

During this presentation I will look at our daily lives to see what it is about the way we live that makes us need television to the extent that we do. Much of the public discourse surrounding television and children in particular focuses on the perceived negative influences. Rarely do we highlight some of the things the medium does best. Furthermore, research during the last 30 years has sufficiently developed that we can say with some certainty what the influences on children might be. These we will outline briefly. Having developed a perspective on our family lives, and the way we use the medium, as well as having examined some of the influences of television in a pragmatic way, we might look at some suggestions as to how parents and even society might come to terms with a medium that has now been with us for more than a generation, yet one which we still feel unable to control.

WHO IS WATCHING TELEVISION TODAY?

There is no doubt that Canadians, in spite of what they may tell you, have developed a strong habit, at least during the winter months, of watching television. However, the family watching television in 1989 is radically different from that of 1956. The difference can be characterized by using two TV programs as models to reflect the changes in our culture. In 1956 families were idealized by the program "Father Knows Best", which reflected the expressed ideal of a society for a nuclear family made up of father (who earned the bacon), mother (who cooked it) and children. Current programs reflect the variety of family forms which are to be found in our culture today. The Cosbys (as a professional, dual income family with children), Kate & Allie (two divorced single mothers, sharing not just a house but making a home together with their children), Our House (a widow living with her children in her father-in-law's house), My Two Dads (both of whom inherit joint custody of a teenage girl when her mother dies and paternity is unclear) [definitely not a show of the 1950's!!] and, of course, Family Ties. Even with this show the conventions have changed significantly.

The simple illustration of today's sitcoms points out the extent to which families now differ. If we look at families today, we will see that they differ by structure and by membership. Who are the families watching television today?

They are:

- the husband and wife
- common-law husband, common-law wife
- biological children
- stepchildren
- grandparents
- adolescent mother with her father and mother
- lone parent and children
- multi-generational family
- member with special needs.

Families also differ by heritage, by locality, by stage of family life cycle, and by functional patterns (one-earner, two-earner, multiple earners, rigid division of domestic labour and/or child care, etc.)

What is truly notable in the 1980's is the proportion of young women with children who have entered the labour force or who have remained in the labour force after the birth of their children. Their numbers have doubled in the past 30 years. (65% of married women between 25 and 34 are now in the labour force.) In order to provide a reasonable income to sustain a family and a certain number of dependents, a large majority of Canadian families must now depend on two wage earners with all that that implies.

Given this significant change in family life in recent years, what does family feel like today? For many, family life and the relationships within it feel as if each is living on the leftovers of human time and commitment. We may be sharing our tiredness more than our liveliness, with a pervasive sense of exhaustion, tension and guilt.

Picture, if you will, the typical routine of the average young family:

> Up early in the morning in time to get the kids dressed, lunches made and kids delivered to day-care or school before mother and father must arrive at their place of employment. Then, there proceeds a regular day of "busyness", meetings, phone calls, clients, assembly lines and memos before rushing to pick up the kids by a pre-arranged time so that their care givers do not charge us with breach of contract (in Ottawa, $1/minute). Then, home to prepare a meal while TV babysits the kids. Once a week we're off to the community college to take a course on introduction to microprocessing for the sake of career advancement, at least one other evening is devoted to some school or day-care advisory committee and, if we can fit it in, we try to make it to an exercise class now and then trying to keep our bodies fit enough to pursue this pace. Baths and homework are supervised prior to our scheduled amount of time for spousal interpersonal relating before we watch the National News which, thank God, now comes on at 10:00 p.m. because the CBC shrewdly realized that few of us can keep our eyes open past 10:30. Weekends have assumed their own schedule, often even tighter than the weekdays as we set off to Canadian Tire to purchase the insulating materials that will occupy us on Sunday before, if we can manage it, friends arrive for dinner. Those of us who are in the sandwich generation trying to assume either financial or social and emotional responsibility for our aging parents as well as our kids try to squeeze in a visit with Grandma or Grandpa on the weekend too.

Briefly, this reflects the chaotic condition of most of our daily lives. We seek refuge in the misnamed "family room" each evening between the hours of 7:30 and 11:00 when we turn on the television set, not to watch a particular program but simply to watch television, choosing the least objectionable program per given half-hour knowing that another program will replace it. The next thing we know Barbara Frum is saying goodnight.

According to the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM - Fall survey), Canadians during 1988 watched on average 24 hours per week of television. If one consults American statistics one finds that on average American children watch 27.8 hours of TV per week if they are aged between 2 and 5 years, 24 hours for children between 6 and 11 years, and 23 hours for teenagers. As people leave the teen years, the number of hours climbs to 28 for adults.

If one calculates the number of hours that we sleep each week (56 hours), the number of hours we work at jobs or in the community (40 hours), and we watch TV 28 hours per week, we can see that there is very little time left for the kinds of relational engagements we all say that we value. Here we speak of time - we do not even begin to talk of motivation and the energy required. We seem ready, once we have come home from work and dispensed with the essential tasks of eating and putting the children to bed, to trade in our daily diary which compartmentalized our workplace activities for the **TV Times** which does the same.

The creative energy required to motivate oneself to seek alternative activities to occupy the unscheduled time (however limited) which is available to us is hard to come by. If it is a choice between TV and Valium, Canadians seem to be choosing TV in large measure.

The medium of TV operates in real time - if you miss any part of the program as it is being broadcast you cannot recapture it later on (VCR's notwithstanding). It's gone!! The real time nature of the medium has allowed us to escape each other as we sit within the same room fostering the illusion that we are engaged in a family activity. If your child or spouse approaches you as you are reading the newspaper and says "Something important happened today" - you can put down the newspaper, attend to their needs and later resume your reading. How many of us have sat in the family room while the TV set is on and have said when approached with something important, "SSSHHH, wait a minute, I am watching this." and 30 minutes later, "SSHH", something else is important. In each instance, we may be denying the affirmation which is required by the other person.

In "Television Watching and Family Tensions" in the February 1976 issue of **The Journal of Marriage and the Family**, the authors hypothesized that the TV could be associated with family problems when it is used as a coping mechanism or, more importantly, as a means of avoiding dealing with family problems. The real time nature of the medium excuses recognition of other family members' needs. People have always been able to escape tensions within the home simply by leaving. However, if the absence was recurrent it signalled to the spouse remaining behind that there may be an issue within the relationship. Our use of the medium of TV in real time may be allowing us to avoid tense interactions and therefore not recognizing that there is an issue simply because we are together in the "family room" sharing a TV program.

Similarly, when children are in the way as we prepare dinner, they turn to TV since the medium does not require the mediation of an adult, as does a story, and consequently they adopt patterns similar to those of their parents. The energy required to deal with a child invited to help in the kitchen during meal preparation may be more than we have to offer.

BALANCE/COUNTERBALANCE

Whether we are talking about adults or children, what does three hours per day of TV watching do for us? One of the things that TV does best is to familiarize us with issues, things, persons, and elements of the human condition which we will never have an opportunity to experience directly. How many of us, for example, despite nightly newscasts describing the conditions in Lebanon, can explain who is fighting whom and why? We are familiar with the situation but it takes more than a nightly newscast to really understand.

Television familiarizes us extremely well with situations that we might not otherwise encounter. But, using the example of the war in Lebanon, to develop an understanding requires that we might need to visit the country to witness the rage and its expression or to have neighbours who have fled the war-torn nation describe for us the circumstances which led to their escape and their anguished concern for relatives left behind. We might also need to read historical accounts of the Lebanese conflict to enrich our perspective. All of this is to suggest that a diversity of experience, sources, and approaches is required in order for us to begin to synthesize some level of real understanding. However, we rarely move beyond the level of familiarity, be it the war in Lebanon or any other program. TV is entertainment and for most of us, we have neither the time nor the energy to move beyond what the medium can provide. To what extent can we move beyond familiarity and enter the world of understanding if the way we choose to use our disposable time is primarily dedicated to one type of activity based on one particular medium's expression of any given idea.

One of TV's most popular programs is not produced in Hollywood or in Toronto but rather in local communities. It is the local newscast at suppertime. Canadians value privacy and their homes are the ultimate refuge. As a consequence they turn on the local news to discover what is happening within their own community thus fostering the illusion that they are participants in the community's activities. Yet they are simply observers from a distance. Children or adults, through their participation in living experiences within the community, observing the behaviour of others, i.e. senior citizens, young couples with infants, children older than themselves, children younger than themselves, people arguing in public spaces, begin to pick up cues for appropriate behaviour long before they require them so that when confronted with an unfamiliar situation they might search their lived experience "memory bank" for appropriate alternatives for behaviour. I would suggest that the growth of the "how to" book industry in recent years is testimony to the fact that few of us carry sufficient or adequate cues for appropriate behaviour gained from the experience of living in community. Therefore, by default TV provides us with cues for behaviour (familiarity) in the absence of

real experiences. A culture such as ours which is structured primarily on the basis of age and gender limits the possibilities for inter-generational contact, for contact among peoples of diverse backgrounds and experience. For many community cannot even be found within the community centre and the recreation centre where most programs are devised along age, gender and interest lines.

Given our harried lifestyles and the role that television occupies in our attempt to cope, how can we diversify the basis of our experience. By default, we are being socialized by television. The question is, how de we provide ourselves with the diversity of lived experience that brings real understanding to the familiarity that television provides.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT TV AND OUR CHILDREN?

We now turn finally to children, who like their adult counterparts admit TV into their lives at an early age and with great ease. Of major concern to parents is the effect of this early exposure to the medium of television and the cumulative effect it will have on their lives. Parents seem to be balancing on a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they do not wish to "hold back" their pre-schoolers by denying them the benefits of **Sesame Street** or **Polka Dot Door**. While on the other hand, they feel that such exposure leads to the development of an interest in "Saturday morning cartoons" and other children's programs which they do not value as contributing positively to their children's development.

However parents rationalize their children's viewing, they will watch. The medium is well-entrenched within their culture and will remain a part of their reality.

A recently published review of the research literature studying **The Impact on Children's Education: Television's Influence on Cognitive Development** has reversed many of the common assertions made by parents about the medium. Anderson and Collins in their study state :

- ...that there is no evidence that television has a mesmerizing effect on a child's attention; ...children's attention is variable;
- ...programs produced specifically for children are readily understood; ...their attention is fragmented only when they try to follow complex adult level presentations;
- ...children will vary their activity between television and playing concurrently; ...conversations indicate that children do speculate and reflect about program resolutions;
- "...there is little evidence that television viewing displaces valuable cognitive activities"; ...TV viewing displaces other forms of entertainment (i.e. radio, reading, listening to music and participation to organized sports); "...homework does not seem to be affected";
- "...there is no clear evidence that television influences imaginativeness"; ...however, one study suggests the inability to think of alternative uses for an object;

-"...TV viewing may affect task perseverance and impulsivity";
"...viewing violent action programs may cause reduced perseverance and viewing educational programs may cause increased perseverance."

This literature review strongly refutes the popularly-held beliefs that television is mesmerizing, that it inhibits cognitive development and that children cannot engage in alternative activities. However, when examining the conclusions around imagination and activities forsaken for television viewing, it seems to suggest that if we are to engage in any kind of parental influence it should be in the area of introducing children to alternative activities.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

While our expressed concern is always about children, in light of issues raised in the first part of this paper, we can easily direct some of the suggestions to adults as well. Most often we express our displeasure with the medium because of what we perceive to be wrong with commercials and certain programs. Our usual response is to demand that governments, through their regulatory agencies, control what is made available over the airwaves. Similarly, parents anguish over how to control their children's use of the medium.

Interestingly enough, governments and parents are facing the same dilemma - how to control that which can no longer be controlled? Most Canadian communities, if cabled, received some 25 to 30 channels, of which at most five or six are Canadian and therefore subject to the regulatory controls of our Government. Historically, it was easy to control the few networks which existed when the distribution system was limited to airwaves.

Similarly, parents, in the early days of TV, when the schedule was limited to a few hours in the broadcast day and the number of channels was restricted, could more easily control what their children watched. Today, with most households having two TV sets, if not more, connected to cable systems offering some 30 channels, control in the old sense is no longer realistic, and children do not limit their viewing to their own home but watch at friends' homes, or when their parents are not home.

If control is not within our parental reach and our governments cannot control the majority of the signals which enter our livingrooms, then what is to be our approach?

Many have suggested that the answer lies in turning off our television sets. This option is neither realistic nor viable given the conditions and lifestyles which exist within most households.

One of the suggestions often heard is that parents watch with children certain programs in order that they might help young ones interpret and understand the content which is being presented. The parent is meant to be the mediator. The previous section has demonstrated that children have developed a keen selective ability to choose programs which are

appropriate to their capacity for comprehension. Consequently, it may not be as necessary for parents to mediate and interpret programs for their children. The limited time that parents have available may be better spent trying to introduce and re-introduce their children to a diverse group of alternative activities which might experientially help the child develop sense of identity, self-worth and skill development. Initially this will be demanding for the parents since they must motivate themselves and their children to deal creatively with unscheduled time. Through doing whatever is fun alone and with others, a child may learn how to be responsible. All that "responsible" means in this case is "to be able to respond".)

Once the child is old enough, we can invoke the same techniques that parents have used when they introduce the weekly allowance. Parents, wishing their children to learn to budget, give them an allowance to support whatever independent purchases children wish to make. "Once you have spent the money, don't ask for more. You must then wait for next week's allowance." Teaching time-budgeting is equally appropriate.

A child could be given on a Saturday a copy of the **TV Times** and parent and child can then negotiate how many hours a week of TV would be appropriate for that child. Let us assume that we arrive at the figure of seven hours per week. (We know that the child watches TV elsewhere e.g. friends' homes, at the babysitters, etc.) All that we are hoping to accomplish is to reduce the time he or she watches television such that we can introduce them to alternative activities.

During the first week, by Sunday evening, they will have exhausted their allotted time and by Monday expressions of "I am bored" and "There is nothing to do" will be heard. It is at this point that parents will be required to have the energy and motivation to guide their children to develop new interests and participate in activities outside the home.

Over time they will hopefully become engaged in other activities and the refrain of boredom won't be heard. Also, it is hoped that they will choose to watch less TV as they become more interested and confident in their engagement in alternative activities. All you can do is create a climate in which alternative activities with diverse groups of friends can be perceived in a preferential way.

Similarly, when Canadian television airwaves are swamped by foreign content Canadian government regulatory agencies cannot control that which enters our living room. There are very few avenues left to us as a Canadian culture if we are to provide a distinctly Canadian perspective. Governments may only now be able to cultivate the development and creation of content which is of such excellent quality that it will more often than not displace or complement that which we currently choose to watch. This approach requires a great deal of human resources,commitment, money, and vision for it to be successful. I am not sure that as a nation we are prepared to seek those kinds of cultural alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Family life has changed dramatically during the past 30 years. Now commitments and obligations fragment family time and energy. As a result, families choose to devote more and more time to television in order to seek relief and refuge from demanding economic, social and family pressures.

If the medium has an undue effect, it is largely by default as more and more of our familiarity with our community and the world comes from television and less and less from the lived experiences which are gained from being engaged in and with a diversity of persons and activities. Cues for appropriate behaviour in new and unfamiliar situations (socialization) are therefore derived more and more from television and "how to" books and less and less from persons engaged in the community who reflect the norms and values of that community and its families.

Recommendations:

1. Engage more in the informal, neighbourly community's activities - seek for yourself as an adult and your children inter-generational contact on a regular basis.

2. Be conscious that we use the medium's "real time" quality as a convenient tool to avoid family discussions which can be affirming for members of the family.

3. If television is watched in moderation and people are engaged more and more in alternate activities then we need be less worried about what is watched as program messages will be counterbalanced by community standards. Our preference for undue isolation and privacy may contribute more to television's effect than any particular program.

4. Teach children by example to time budget their viewing.

5. As a nation we should concentrate less on control of content, since imported signals cannot be managed, and pursue excellence on Canadian airwaves in the hope of displacing some of the programs we may find more objectionable.